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Bob Holley

Wayne State University, aa3805@wayne.edu

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Random Ramblings — "Petit pois" and Publication

Column Editor: **Bob Holley** (Professor, Library & Information Science Program, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI 48202; Phone: 313-577-4021; Fax: 313-577-7563) <aa3805@wayne.edu>

What happens when the means get mistaken for the ends or when the ends are manipulated? I'll give my two favorite examples from everyday life. People bought "petit pois," little peas, because their small size indicated that the peas were immature and therefore tender and especially tasty. To capitalize on this characteristic, the plant breeders created new varieties of peas that stayed "petit" even when old and tough since doing so simplified raising and harvesting the crop. The second example is from the movie, *Bridge on the River Kwai*, where **Colonel Nicholson** helped the Japanese to build a solid bridge to show the superiority of British engineering while mostly forgetting that the Japanese were the enemies and that his goal should be to hinder their success by building a flimsy bridge. (I know that the movie is mostly fiction).

What does this have to do with scholarly publication? I came away from the **2008 Charleston Conference** with the conviction that the role of publishers, vendors, and librarians within the academic marketplace was not so much to improve the world by advancing knowledge but to help faculty, researchers, and librarians get tenure, promotion, and salary increases. Publication, the means in earlier times for advancing knowledge, has become the end — the coin of the realm for enhanced academic careers and often for getting tenure to keep the faculty position.

Times have also changed since the rapid growth in higher education from the late 1940s to about 1971. (I became a librarian because I graduated in the very first year of the PhD glut in that year when all of us with newly-minted doctorates expected to get multiple offers from prestigious schools). As I tell my students, the only requirement for getting a librarian position in the 1960s was having an MLS from an accredited school and breathing. Today, especially in disciplines with an overabundance of unemployed or underemployed PhD's such as the Humanities and some of the Social Sciences, administrators know that they can demand more publications and set high standards that make life miserable for non-tenured faculty and even for tenured faculty who wish to advance or who find themselves in institutions with post-tenure review. The old rule-of-thumb of four to five solid peer reviewed articles in acceptable journals or a tenure book has been replaced by a minimum of two articles a year, some of them in the "best" or most "high impact" journals, or by two books or a book plus a strong record of journal publication.

A second factor is the push to publish even before achieving a faculty position. Several groups fall into this category. PhD's who are unemployed or working as adjuncts attempt to strengthen their vitae in hope of getting a tenure-track position. Doctoral students like to have a publication or two to prove to possible employers that they will be productive scholars. In our own field in these tough days for getting a job, my master's level students wish to stand out from their competitors by having at least one publication. I'll be giving a talk to students later this month on how to get published, and plans are underway to establish a support group for budding student authors.

After the push comes the shove. Strategies exist for faculty, especially tenure track faculty, to meet the publication requirements by gaming the system. I suspect that most institutions do like mine and assign a senior faculty mentor to the new professor. A good mentor, according to the discipline, should suggest some or all of the following tactics. The first is to encourage new professors to turn their dissertations into a book or preferably several articles since multiple articles often carry more weight. They should also avoid complicated projects that will require a long time to complete because they involve comprehensive research, extensive data collection, or the use of difficult to find resources. In addition, they should divide their findings into the smallest justifiable components to get multiple publications rather than only one. In the areas that have a tradition of multiple authors, they should try to get their names on as many publications as possible even if their input was minimal. They also need to get their names as high as possible on the list of authors since review committees look at such placements. Faculty also focus on smaller niche topics where the background research takes less time and where they have a greater chance to be original. (I confess that I finished my dissertation in thirteen months by following this strategy). The reverse option is to focus on "hot" topics, especially relatively new "hot" topics where journal editors will accept even marginal publications because of the interest in the subject. Finally as a minor example, I heard many years ago about an untenured professor who specialized in finding faults, sometimes minor ones, in the published articles in his field and then writing a rebuttal article.

While all these strategies are good for creating publications that can then get counted and weighed, they are often bad for scholarly communication and the advancement of knowledge. Breaking research into multiple smaller publications burdens the system by requiring more time from peer reviewers and editors, more indexing and abstracting by the various services, and finally the need for readers to pull the pieces together to get the full picture of the researchers' work. Furthermore, too much focus on easy, doable research and niche topics may take faculty away from dealing with the difficult questions in their fields that have the potential to advance knowledge much more with one solid article or book than do multiple "minor" publications.

Mark Bauerlein, Professor of English, **Emory University**, has a recent article on research overproduction in the Humanities that should be required reading for all who worry about scholarly communication. (**Mark Bauerlein**, "The Future of Humanities Labor," *Academe*, September-October, 2008. *http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2008/SO/Feat/baue.htm*). In making many of the same points that I do, he documents the increase in the number of publications. He contends that "[w]hen humanities departments and committees and chairpersons examine a professor's record, all too often they measure the output, not the excellence." With the need to discover new topics and to dig ever more deeply into minor subject and authors, "this perverse system … has made humanities fields interesting only to people within them" so that "[h]umanities research has no audience outside the specialists." He also argues that "[w]e cannot blame graduate students and young scholars for rushing manuscripts into submission and cutting corners on research when the hustle for jobs and tenure urges them, 'Produce, produce!'" On this issue, I remember very well one Italian professor from my graduate school days who told us that he spent an entire summer searching through Italian archives to discover that exact configuration of one city's fleet so that he could accurately date one of **Dante's** poems. I will add that he was a visiting professor from Great Britain where the rules for evaluation were much different at that time.

To return to my opening paragraphs, the solution would be to focus on the ends, the advancement of knowledge, the original "petit pois," rather than the means, publications, the tough new tiny peas that look tasty but are not. As I said in last month's column, I remember a movement a few years ago to focus on fewer but higher quality publications that would deal in greater depth with more substantive issues. Nothing happened. Changing the culture of publication is most likely as intractable as dealing with another evaluation issue in higher education — grade inflation. To get faculty to change, administrators, senior faculty, review bodies, and search committees need to offer new incentives that go beyond mere words and that introduce substantive change in academic evaluation. To give an example from the corporate world, I follow the customer service literature for the management class that I teach. I particularly like one e-newsletter, *The Customer Think Advisor*, for continually reminding its readers that employees are not stupid. They do what they see is rewarded rather than what their administrators say they should do. Most often, customer service is lauded in principle, but unrewarded in practice. I believe that same is true for quality in publications. As long as the rewards flow from numbers and word count rather than from quality and impact, researchers will maintain the current flood of publications as the best way to advance their careers or to ensure their academic survival.